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The Ethics of Identifiers and Causal Relations in Journalism

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UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, DURHAM

THE ETHICS OF IDENTIFIERS AND CAUSAL RELATIONS IN JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

The AP Stylebook, a guide used by many journalism organizations to inform editorial decision making, says identifiers such as race should be included in news stories when "pertinent." But how do we determine when an identifier is pertinent? My analysis of news stories demonstrates that sometimes identifiers can suggest a causal relation between an identity and an event. For example, journalists will identify race in any story involving a white police officer shooting a black suspect, even if the facts of the story suggest that the shooting was justified. Journalists also widely reported the sexual orientation of the victims in the Pulse nightclub shooting, although it later emerged the perpetrator was not aware that Pulse was known as a gay club. The dilemma journalists face – whether to include identifiers or not in their coverage – arises from an unavoidable lack of hindsight and the power of identifiers to shape public thought. Using their best news judgement, journalists must decide whether to withhold facts to avoid implying a false correlation, or to deliver the facts and risk misleading their readers.

With this in mind, I analyze high profile news stories from two of the most-circulated and influential newspapers, The Washington Post and The New York Times, to study the impact of including or withholding identifiers such as race and sexual orientation. Following that analysis, I will offer a creed journalism organizations should include in their code of ethics.

I. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This thesis seeks to uncover the often faulty editorial decision making in newsrooms across the country in regard to when identifiers such as race and sexual orientation are used in a news story, and through analyzing high profile news stories from The Washington Post and The

New York Times that use identifiers in faulty ways, will propose a creed journalism organizations should adopt in their code of ethics.

II. REVIEW OF CURRENT POLICY/LANDSCAPE

Each newsroom has its own standards or news judgements on news coverage that is created under the proposal of The Associated Press Stylebook, (commonly referred to as the AP Stylebook). The AP Stylebook refers to the guidelines from the Associated Press Stylebook, and is used amongst many newsrooms as the standard by which all news is measured. It is a comprehensive reference manual, and it has long been hailed as the bible for journalists. It is a style guide based off the Associated Press, which is “the essential global news network, delivering fast, unbiased news from every corner of the world to all media platforms and formats. Founded in 1846, AP today is the most trusted source of independent news and information. On any given day, more than half the world’s population sees news from AP” (Associated Press). The newest edition contains more than 3,000 a-to-z entries detailing AP’s rules on grammar, spelling, capitalization, abbreviation, and word and numeral usage, according to its synopsis.

III. THE WASHINGTON POST STYLEBOOK

The Washington Post is an American newspaper published daily in Washington, D.C., and is known to have a large circulation in the United States, and a large digital following of about 1.27 million subscribers (Stelter). Below is a direct entry from The Washington Post’s guidelines from their own style manual on when to use race news story. It does not have a style guide in regard to when sexual orientation should be used.

race, racial identification and ethnicity

Last Updated: 07/11/2016 12:47:38 PM

- a. In general, race and ethnic background should not be mentioned unless they are clearly relevant. They are obviously relevant in stories about civil rights issues, the problems or achievements of minority groups, cultural history and racial conflict. They are also relevant and should be used in crime stories when we have enough specific identifying information to publish a police description of a suspect who is being sought.
- b. Avoid ethnic labels and stereotypes such as *hard-drinking Irishman*, *tempestuous Latinos* or *Chinese fire drill*.
- c. The terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* are not always interchangeable. When referring to an individual's ethnicity, be as specific as possible about the country of origin: *Mexican American*, *Cuban American*. When writing more generally, *Hispanic* or *Latino* can encompass Americans of Mexican, Central American, Spanish-speaking Caribbean or South American background. People from Puerto Rico are Puerto Ricans (and are U.S. citizens, not immigrants), but they can be referred to as Hispanics or Latinos when grouped with others of Latin American background. By U.S. government definition, people of Portuguese background, including Brazilians, are not Hispanics. Brazilians can be referred to as Latinos when grouped with others of Latin American background. Spaniards are Hispanics but not Latinos.
- d. Avoid broad generalizations on attire. A reference to "traditional dress" may represent the attire of a particular region or nation, but isn't necessarily an indication of a person's religion.

IV. THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLEBOOK

The New York Times is a daily American newspaper based in New York City read worldwide. It was founded in 1851 and is ranked as the second most circulated newspaper in the

United States. Below is a direct entry from The New York Times' guidelines from their own style manual on when to use race and sexual orientation in a news story:

race should be cited only when it is pertinent and its pertinence is clear to the reader. The race of a victim of a hate crime or the subject of a police search is clearly germane, an essential part of the person's description. But the race of a person convicted of a crime is not pertinent unless the case has racial overtones; if it does, the overtones should be explained. *Also see* AFRICAN-AMERICAN, BLACK; (-)AMERICAN, AMERICAN INDIAN(S); ASIAN-AMERICAN, HISPANIC.

sexual orientation, never *sexual preference*, which carries the disputed implication that sexuality is a matter of choice. Cite a person's sexual orientation only when it is pertinent and its pertinence is clear to the reader. *Also see* BISEXUAL; GAY; LESBIAN; STRAIGHT (Siegal and Connolly).

V. JOURNALISM AND ETHICS

Currently, each newsroom has its own standards or character judgements on news coverage that is created under the proposal of The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics. Although these judgements reside under each newsroom's Code of Ethics, not every newsroom's is alike. The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics outlines four principles as the outline of ethical journalism and "encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media" (SPJ). These declared principles are to "Seek Truth and Report It," "Minimize Harm," "Act Independently" and "Be Accountable and Transparent." In addition, journalists have an ethical and professional calling to report on "newsworthy" stories, to which the Code of Ethics are applied (Society of Professional Journalists).

IV. THE IDENTIFIER OF RACE

The identifier of race and its pertinence is a multi-faceted judgement in journalism. The AP Stylebook says that identification by race or ethnicity is pertinent in biographical and announcement stories that involve significant, groundbreaking or historic events, such as being elected U.S. president, being named to the U.S. Supreme Court or other notable occurrences. It also determines race to be pertinent in stories where suspects are being sought by the police or missing person cases using police or other credible, detailed descriptions. Such descriptions apply for all races, and the racial reference should be removed when the individual is apprehended or found. Race is also concluded to be pertinent when reporting a demonstration or disturbance involving race or such issues as civil rights or slavery. The AP Stylebook advises “in other situations with racial overtones, use news judgement” (Associated Press). My analysis will examine several high profile news stories where the inclusion of such an identifier and the causal relations they implied have led to catastrophic mistruths, and was thereby journalistically unethical.

1. *The New York Times*, 4 April 2018

To begin, I would like to analyze the reporting on the death of Saheed Vassell, drawing an example from The New York Times. Vassell, 34, was shot and killed by police on a Brooklyn street corner on April 4, 2018. The police were responding to the many calls reporting a man was threatening people with a silver gun. After Vassell pointed what the officers believed to be a gun at them, he was shot and killed, but it was later revealed the item was a metal pipe with a knob on it that looked identical to a gun from afar. It was also included that the police department had encountered the man before and had classified him as emotionally disturbed. Given these facts,

The New York Times decided to headline the article as “Police Fatally Shoot a Brooklyn Man, Saying They Thought He Had a Gun,” and to include the identifier of “black” in the lede. The lede is the opening sentence or paragraph of a news article, summarizing the most important aspects of the story. The lede said:

“New York City police officers shot and killed a black man who was known to be mentally ill on a Brooklyn street corner on Wednesday afternoon after he pointed what the officers believed was a gun at them, the authorities said. The object, however, turned out to be a metal pipe with a knob on it.” (Mueller and Schweber)

Per their style guide, race is only to be included if pertinent and its pertinence is clear to the reader. In my analysis, The New York Times’ decision to include race in the lede inappropriately injected race as a causal factor into Vassell’s death without any facts to support a racial motive, and may have falsely implied it was a hate crime. In doing so, this created a racial animus and led the readership into believing race played into a cause and effect. The profession of journalism requires the gathering and presentation of facts and context so that readers can form their own opinions. Instead, the lede’s identifier suggested a causal relation between the identity of Vassell and the event of his death, when no facts existed to support it.

In my version of a style guide, race would have been introduced later in the story when it was reported that, “...Other crowd members wept at how this had happened on the 50th anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Others spoke of wanting to riot. When darkness fell, a group of about 10 protesters arrived carrying Black Lives Matter signs” (Mueller and Schweber). In this section, race would have to be included, as it was one of the reactions of the public. However, the inclusion of “black” in the lede places a heavy

emphasis on race without any facts to support it, and was therefore journalistically misleading and unethical. My version of a style guide would include the guideline “Be wary of the causal relation implied on race when used in the headline/lead. Consider introducing race later in story if causation can’t be proved but pertinence still exists.”

2. *The Washington Post*, 22 Jan. 2019

According to its style manual, The Washington Post says that race and ethnic background “are obviously relevant in stories about civil rights issues, the problems or achievements of minority groups, cultural history and racial conflict.” However, this is a vague statement that has allowed for any mention of race to become relevant in the pursuit of a narrative. In the following examples of race used in recent high-profile news story, journalists used race in a way that promotes a false narrative that is slanderous and not exemplary of journalistic integrity. A notable example of such an argument can be seen in the reporting of what became known as sensationalizing a Native American and defaming a group of Catholic high school boys. The Washington Post covered the encounter between two disparate people gathered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on January 18, 2019. The initial encounter that was spread around several media and social media platforms was one between Nick Sandmann, a high school boy from Covington Catholic High School waiting for his bus with his fellow classmates after the pro-life march “March for Life,” and Nathan Phillips, a Native American elder who was present for the “Indigenous Peoples March.”

The early reporting was wrong, in part, because it relied on a video of a small slice of a larger event. It was a slice of a nearly two-hour long video, published to YouTube on January 20, that shows what happened before and after the encounter, and this context severely contradicted

the narrative the media so carelessly presented. The video that initially circulated around several social media platforms was one that showed Sandmann, with fellow students around him, face-to-face with Phillips. In the January 18, 2019 video, of which many news stories were written, Sandmann and Phillips are face-to-face. Sandmann's expression is best described as an unwavering smile, while Phillips bangs the drum in his face and chants what is probably a tribal song. You can also notice Sandmann's fellow classmates dancing to the beat of the drum, looking at each other and each other's phone. Not much is clear about the context of the situation, or about the events that occurred leading up to what can be seen in the video. But instead of exhibiting journalistic values and manners of curiosity through seeking context, news outlets eagerly adopted the unquestionably non-contextual video as an aid in the narrative of racial discourse in Trump's America, wherein it was reported the Covington boys had instigated the conflict with Phillips. Stated bluntly, the story did not have any inherent news significance, but The Washington Post fabricated significance to it through assigning relevance to race in pursuit of a narrative.

Among articles written by The Washington Post was one headlined "'It was getting ugly': Native American drummer speaks on his encounter with MAGA-hat-wearing teens" dated January 22, 2019. It was originally headlined as "'It was getting ugly': Native American drummer speaks on the MAGA-hat-wearing teens who surrounded him." Firstly, it can be observed that the article was published even after the additional footage was made available to the public, proving the staff did not conduct due journalistic process whatsoever. The editorial decision to include the race/ethnicity of Native American in the headline was made, and this identity was being balanced against "MAGA-hat-wearing teens." The headline sets the precedent

that the race of the individuals in the incident is a catalyst to what occurs and places an over-emphasis on such a label to create a narrative of racial intolerance and prejudice.

It is the role of journalists to question what is in front of them, to find more context and to seek the truth. As a college journalist I can conclude that this was not the case in a story that soon became a national, high-profile one based off of feeding a false narrative on selective context rather than reporting the truth in cooperation with the full context and facts. Reading the lede and nut grafs of the article will demonstrate that the editorial staff was explicitly feeding the public with an intentional delivery that the incident was one of a heroic Native American who was mocked by a group of Trump-supporting Catholic boys. However, watching the full video of the encounter that day shows a completely different story than the one reported by The Washington Post and undeniably shows that journalistic standards of gathering information and reporting off full context was not followed.

The lede and nut graf read as follows:

“The images in videos that went viral on social media Saturday showed a tense scene near the Lincoln Memorial.

A Native American man steadily beats his drum at the tail end of Friday’s Indigenous Peoples March while singing a song of unity urging participants to “be strong” against the ravages of colonialism that include police brutality, poor access to health care and the ill effects of climate change on reservations.

Surrounding him are a throng of young, mostly white teenage boys, several wearing “Make America Great Again” caps. One stood about a foot from the drummer’s face wearing a relentless smirk.” (Wootson Jr. et al.)

Here, we can see that the race of the Native American man and the race of the “mostly white” teenage boys is revealed. The identity of a white Trump supporter, and the narrated event of prejudice and disrespect toward a Native American elder is a standout example of inappropriate causality. The full context of the video will reveal that the Covington High School boys were provoked and slandered by a group of Black Hebrew Israelites who initiated racial insults and derogatories toward the boys. Upon this provocation and with the permission of the supervisor, the boys begin to chant their school spirit to drown out the insults and derogatories being directed toward them. This is when Nathan Phillips, the Native American elder painted as a victim from the media comes into play, wherein facts show he confronts the group of boys and gets within inches of the face of Nick Sandmann, a boy who would become the extreme target of slander as a result of poor reporting. The Washington Post assigned the look on Sandmann’s face as a result of the unexpected confrontation by Phillips to be one of a “relentless smirk.” This undoubtedly aided their narrative, as did the further reporting that the teens “swarmed around him [Phillips]” (Wootson Jr. et al.) as he was preparing to leave. Although video footage plainly shows that Phillips confronted the teens and was the one who got within inches of Sandmann’s face, the media still reported and sensationalized a Native American man in a way that catered to the false narrative and causality that painted it as a social justice issue and yet another example of alleged social discourse in Trump’s America.

My version of a style guide would include a subset under the identifier of race that reinforces the journalist’s duty in due process and bipartisanship before jumping to premature conclusions. This practice in itself would eliminate premature articles from being written in the first place, so that journalists can use their power to inform public thought in an unbiased and

transparent manner. Although this has been the role of quality journalism since the beginning of the profession, quality journalism is at risk of falling victim to a left-leaning ideology that allows for news stories to be sorted by narrative. The narrative of MAGA-hat wearing teens mobbing around a Native American man would have been the perfect example of social discourse in Trump's America, and it was framed as such by both The Washington Post and The New York Times. However, facts revealed the reporting was done entirely wrong, which warranted an Editor's Note in the previous written articles. The Editor's Note cited:

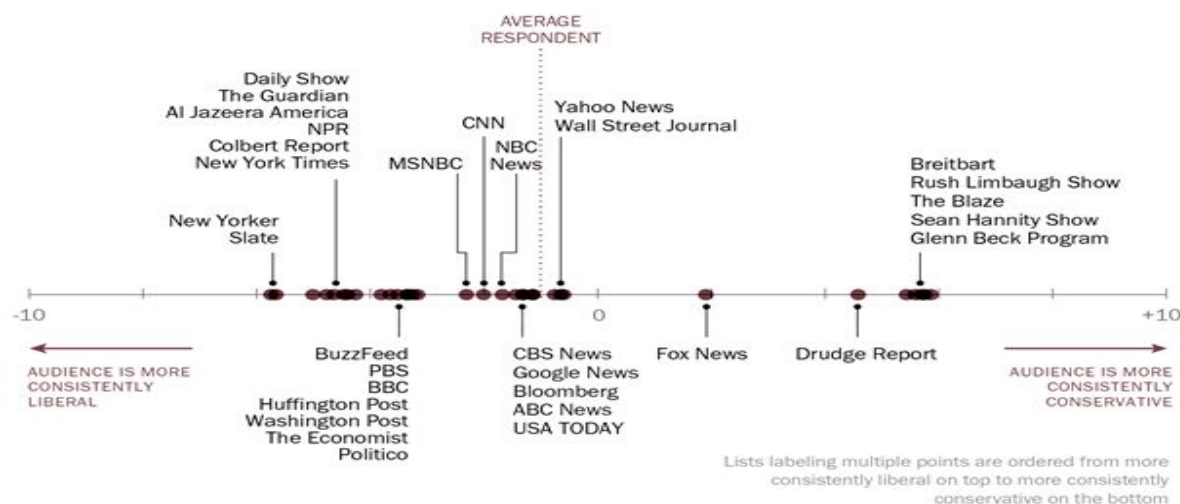
"Editor's Note: Subsequent reporting, a student's statement and additional video allow for a more complete assessment of what occurred during the Jan. 18 incident at the Lincoln Memorial, either contradicting or failing to confirm accounts provided in this story — including that Native American activist Nathan Phillips was prevented by one student from moving on, that his group had been taunted by the students in the lead-up to the encounter, and that the students were trying to instigate a conflict. The high school student facing Phillips issued a statement contradicting his account; the bishop in Covington, Ky., apologized for the statement condemning the students; and an investigation conducted for the Diocese of Covington and Covington Catholic High School found the students' accounts consistent with videos. Subsequent Post coverage, including video, reported these developments: "Viral standoff between a tribal elder and a high schooler is more complicated than it first seemed"; "Kentucky bishop apologizes to Covington Catholic students, says he expects their exoneration"; "Investigation finds no evidence of 'racist or offensive statements' in Mall incident." (March 1)."

A read-through of the editor's note shows a confession that further collection of facts and context contradicted reporting provided in the story. In other words, The Washington Post

admitted it did not conduct due diligence before publishing several news stories that catastrophically misled the public and defamed the Covington Catholic High School boys, namely Nick Sandmann. One has to wonder how a major newspaper could so carelessly publish an article without any verification as to a beginning or end. The political nature of the reporting and subsequent reaction of the article begs the question of the power that ideology can play into reporting. Though unethical, as the golden rule of journalism is to be objective and bipartisan, there is no other plausible reasoning as to why this article was written other than political bias on behalf of the editorial board. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, which focused on “Political Polarization and Media Habits,” it was deemed that, “when it comes to getting news about politics and government, liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds. There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust” (Mitchell et al.). As it relates to my analysis, this ideological divide can best be seen in Pew’s study titled “Media Outlets by the Ideological Composition of Their Audience.”

Ideological Placement of Each Source’s Audience

Average ideological placement on a 10-point scale of ideological consistency of those who got news from each source in the past week...



American Trends Panel (wave 1). Survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Q22. Based on all web respondents. Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see About the Survey for more details.) ThinkProgress, DailyKos, Mother Jones, and The Ed Schultz Show are not included in this graphic because audience sample sizes are too small to analyze.

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Perhaps the most relevant observation as it relates to my thesis is the fact that 100 percent of newspapers are more trusted by liberals than conservatives. It is to be expected that political commentators such as the conservative Glenn Beck is more watched by conservatives, but it is a travesty that newspapers, who are ethically bound to bipartisanship, are significantly more trusted by the left than by the right. This displays a paramount crisis in the way newspapers are conducting themselves.

If the presentation of facts in this news story had been done correctly, the identifier of race would have been relevant. Race became relevant in the event when the Black Hebrew Israelites began to use racial slurs against the Covington High School students. In theory, this would have been an article exemplary of racial pertinence, but instead it has become a national symbol of bad journalism. The angle was one of defaming the Covington boys and sensationalizing Nathan Phillips, even without any evidence of proving a racial motive. After later footage revealed that Phillips was the one who had instigated the confrontation by walking up to the boys, it was also revealed that, moments before, a group of Black Hebrew Israelites had cited racial epithets and slurs to the group of high schoolers. If reporting had been done properly and due process had been committed, race would have been relevant in the story as racial slurs introduced a racial aspect. Instead, in the pursuit of a narrative of racial discourse, journalists ran with the story. The catastrophic condemnation the boys received as a result of false reporting is an embarrassment to journalism. This was yet another standout example of inappropriate causality.

2. *The New York Times*, 19 Jan. 2019

On the day of the incident, The New York Times also wrote an article headlined “Viral Video Shows Boys in ‘Make America Great Again’ Hats Surrounding Native Elder.” The editorial decision to include the race of Nathan Phillips as the presented victim of the scenario implies that it is of pertinence to the events that followed. In the organization’s style guide, the guideline “The race of a victim of a hate crime . . . is clearly germane, an essential part of the person’s description” (Siegal and Connolly). Although the article does not explicitly label the occurrence as a hate crime, one could find a comparison in their decision to hyperinject the identifier of race and the narrative that is created through descriptors against the boys such as “surrounding” in the headline. Immediately it is evident that the news organization decided to write an article which incited public outrage against the Covington High School boys based off a snippet of a video. The articles that followed severely misrepresented the situation.

The lede and nut graaf were:

“They were Catholic high school students who came to Washington on a field trip to rally at the March for Life.

He was a Native American elder who was there to raise awareness at the Indigenous Peoples March.

They intersected on Friday in an unsettling encounter outside the Lincoln Memorial — a throng of cheering and jeering high school boys, predominantly white and wearing “Make America Great Again” gear, surrounding a Native American elder.” (Siegal and Connolly)

The decision to include the race in the headline and the lede places a heavy emphasis between the identities of the individuals and the alleged event that occurred. According to the

headline, the event was MAGA-hat-wearing boys “surrounding” a Native American man, although it was later revealed in additional video footage that the Native American man was the one who approached the boys. With this in mind, the entirety of the article is rendered false. Nevertheless, the narrative created through the injection of race in a slanderous way due to a severe shortcoming of due process created a national uproar against the Covington High School boys, and is a standout example of a news story reported completely wrong.

3. *The Associated Press*, 31 March 2018

Although The Washington Post and The New York Times have constructed a style manual under the proposal of the AP Stylebook, it is even more surprising when The Associated Press, whose official style guide is the AP Stylebook, places identifiers such as race in ways that contradict exemplary objective journalism. The Associated Press News also made the egregious error of implying a causal relation with the placement of the identifier of race in their news story “North Carolina officer shoots, kills man during traffic stop.” The lede and nut graf for a better understanding are as follows:

“WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (AP) — A white North Carolina police officer shot and killed a black passenger who refused orders not to reach for a gun after a late-night traffic stop led to a physical struggle, authorities said Saturday.

The shooting happened after Officer D.E. McGuire stopped a car containing two men and a woman about 10:30 p.m. Friday during a routine patrol northeast of downtown, according to a Winston-Salem Police Department news release.

Edward Van McCrae, 60, was in the rear seat and began making suspicious movements, police say. McGuire told McCrae to stop reaching for concealed areas of the vehicle, but McCrae continued, according to the news release.” (Associated Press)

An evaluation of the facts fails to provide the reader with evidence as to why McCrae’s race played a role in his death, yet its placement and prominence demands attention from its readers, whether or not they agree with the correlation it implies. The account provided by the police alleges that McCrae refused orders not to reach for a visible handgun may demonstrate why the officer shot him, but the decision to include race in the lede implies a cause and effect that could not be proven with logical reasoning.

4. *Associated Press News*, 8 March 2012

It could be argued that the death of Trayvon Martin would never have reached national news had it not been for Benjamin Crump insisting that Darren Wilson had racially profiled Brown, and this is what turned it into a local story of the tragic death of a teen into a national story of white-on-black crime. On February 26, 2012, a 17-year-old boy that the media chose to also identify as African American was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a volunteer neighborhood watchguard identified at first as Hispanic and later on as a “white Hispanic,” in Sanford, Florida. The initial facts given on the night of Martin’s death were that Zimmerman called the police, alleging that Martin was acting suspicious. Although the dispatcher told Zimmerman not to leave his vehicle, he began to follow the direction that Martin was walking. What happened next leading up to the event of Martin being shot to death was not certifiably known, and would later be revealed in a trial, and a concurrent FBI investigation. Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder on April 11, 2012, in the shooting death of Martin.

After a vigorous trial open to the public that ended on July 13, 2013, Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges, and was found to not harbor any racial animus.

The fatal shooting of Martin was not immediately picked up by the national press. The initial coverage was local, available in nearby publications such as The Orlando Sentinel, The Sanford Herald, and local TV affiliates in Orlando, on the death of a teenager at the hands of a volunteer neighborhood watchguard. It was not until the story became centered around the search to prove a racial motive that it was picked up by the national press. The first national news story was published in the Associated Press on March 8, 2012 headlined “Answers sought in death of teen in Fla. suburb” which appropriately did not include race in the headline or the lede.

“ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — The family of a Florida teen who was fatally shot after an encounter with a neighborhood watch leader on Thursday asked the police department investigating the death to release 911 tapes that may help explain how the young man died.

Family members said 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, of Miami, was visiting his father and soon-to-be stepmother last month at their home in a gated community in the Orlando suburb of Sanford. He had gone to a convenience store to buy some Skittles candy and was returning home when he was confronted by an armed man who was head of the local neighborhood watch, family member said.

The man hasn't been charged. His name was redacted along with Martin's name in an initial police report but he was identified as 28-year-old George Zimmerman in a police report released Thursday” (Schneider).

Race is not introduced until later in the story when it is revealed that “Martin's father, Tracy, said Thursday that family members were upset that no arrest had been made. He described the neighborhood as mixed race but his attorneys said they believed Trayvon Martin was being profiled at the time of the encounter because he was a young black man. Zimmerman is white. The attorneys also questioned why a neighborhood watch leader would carry a gun” (Schneider). Here, race is justifiably introduced as it is presented as relevant from the attorneys. However, it is worth noting that AP News erroneously identified Zimmerman as white, when he was self-registered through the United States Census Bureau as a Hispanic man.

5. *The New York Times*, 1 April 2012

One of the first articles published by The New York Times was headlined “Race, Tragedy and Outrage Collide After a Shot in Florida.” Although it is understandable why race would be included in this article as the reporting primarily revolves around the protests of the public whose reaction to the event deemed race to be a motive, there is something to be said about the lack of objectivity in the article. The lede and the nut graf were as follows:

“SANFORD, Fla. — Once again, a river of protest raged through Sanford this weekend to demand justice in the name of an unarmed black teenager shot dead. It gathered strength in front of the historic Crooms Academy, the first high school for black students in Seminole County; surged through the streets; and formed a flood of grief and outrage just outside the Sanford Police Department.

Once again, thousands chanted the name of Trayvon Martin, 17, the youth killed with one bullet while returning to a home in a gated community where he was a guest. Once again, they cried for the arrest of George Zimmerman, 28, the neighborhood watch coordinator

who has claimed self-defense under a Florida law with the assertive name Stand Your Ground.

With five weeks' passage, the fateful encounter between a black youth who wanted to go to college and a Hispanic man who wanted to be a judge has polarized the nation." (Barry et al.)

While it is understandable that race became an element of reporting with the heavy protests that occurred, a transparent sentence stating that no facts existed to support a racial animus should have been included. Instead, the media decided to consistently harp on the identifier of "black teenager," and this decision was also included in articles that did not include the racial identifier attributed to Zimmerman. The consistent appearance of Martin's race and the erratic appearance of Zimmerman's race demonstrates sloppy and inconsistent news judgement, and earns further mistrust of the journalism industry. The consistent use of Martin's race assigned pertinence to that identifier, and this injection of race consistently gave off the impression of a racial animus, which severely misled the public.

Although this particular event did not appropriately warrant the identifier of race yet was assigned relevance by protestors, it brought a dispute worth analyzing on how to properly identify one's race. Not even a month after Martin's death, The New York Times made the editorial decision to assign the identifier of "white Hispanic" to Zimmerman, an identifier that had not yet been used in their reporting in reference to an individual. The first time the editorial team decided to use this identifier was in the March 22, 2012 article headlined "City Criticizes Police Chief After Shooting." This editorial decision to precurse the shooter's race of Hispanic

with that of “white” was one that had not been used in prior reporting, and begged the question of its function and purpose. The appearance of the identifier was in the paragraph:

“Mr. Zimmerman, 28, a white Hispanic, told the police that he shot Trayvon in self-defense after an altercation. The teenager was walking home from a convenience store, where he bought iced tea and Skittles, when he was shot once in the chest.”

(Alvarez)

Although my reading of the articles related to Martin indicates the over-emphasis of race was never necessary to include, it is still worth analyzing not only when race is properly include, but also how to properly identify somebody. Precursing the identifier of “Hispanic” with “white” became a national dispute between those who believed it was injected to desperately push Zimmerman away from a person of color to further the white-on-black crime narrative, and those who believed it was the most factual way of identifying Zimmerman. Whatever viewpoint one carries, it is obvious that the media struggled with the appropriate way to define Zimmerman in a way they had not yet been confronted with before. The rationale behind the decision to include “white” in identifying Zimmerman was because his father is white, while his mother was born in Peru and has black ancestry, which includes her Afro-Peruvian grandfather. At the time Zimmerman was identified as a “white Hispanic,” the U.S. Census Bureau did not have a white Hispanic category. Given it was not recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau, it was journalistically unethical to identify Zimmerman in such a way, as it was not a fact, but rather an assignment of an identity by which he was not even registered as. In fact, Zimmerman was registered as a Hispanic, according to voter registration.

Per the AP style guide, from which many news organizations take instruction, identification by race or ethnicity is pertinent in biographical and announcement stories that involve significant, groundbreaking or historic events. When Barack Obama was elected U.S. president, The New York Times headlined the article “Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls.” The lede of the article was as follows:

“Barack Hussein Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States on Tuesday, sweeping away the last racial barrier in American politics with ease as the country chose him as its first black chief executive.” (Nagourney)

Following the same rationale that The New York Times used in identifying Zimmerman as a “white Hispanic,” one would suspect that Obama would have been identified as a “white African American,” because he also has a white parent. As curious consumers of the news, it is a valid observation and argument to ponder. This observation begs the assertion that identifying Zimmerman as a white Hispanic was a way to further the white-on-black crime narrative, while successes for minority groups are not held to a similar standard of identification.

VII. THE IDENTIFIER OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The AP Stylebook and The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage advises for sexual orientation to be included when pertinent and its pertinence is clear to the reader. The Washington Post does not have a section in their style guide on when to use sexual orientation. Unlike the identifier of race, no straightforward rules exist to provide examples of pertinence. This absence of concrete guidance places full accountability of decision making on the existing editorial board and their basis for news judgement.

In discussing the relevance of using sexual orientation in a news story, the Orlando nightclub shooting is one of particular interest. The shooting occurred on June 12, 2016, when a 29-year-old man named Omar Mateen entered Pulse nightclub at around 2:00 a.m. and began shooting with his AR-15-type rifle and a handgun. The incident left 49 dead and dozens injured before he was shot dead by police. Pulse nightclub was one of the biggest nightclubs in Orlando, and was commonly known as a gay bar and dance club. The incident soon became a high-profile news story as the deadliest mass shooting in the United States and the nation's worst attack since 9/11, until the Las Vegas shooting in 2017. The coverage also gave the impression that this was an anti-gay hate crime, when it was later emerged that the perpetrator was not aware that Pulse was known as a gay club. In hindsight, the identifier of the sexual orientation of individuals who spend their time at Pulse nightclub, and the event of the act of terror upon them was a false causality, as the facts reveal that the motive was not one of homophobia, but rather of hatred with U.S. foreign policy in the military intervention abroad. Mateen, who was born in the United States from Afghan parents, said in a call with the Orlando Police Department while in the Pulse nightclub that America needed to stop bombing Syria and Iraq. He even asked the security guard where all the women were. Simply interviewing the security guard would have been enough to question that the motive had been one of homophobic origins. Instead, journalists fell victim to both pressure of immediately publishing a news story, and perhaps a willingness to blindly believe what would so perfectly fit a narrative of LGBTQ intolerance.

1. *The New York Times*, 12 June 2016

The first article that The New York Times wrote on the incident was headlined "Orlando Gunman Attacks Gay Nightclub, Leaving 50 Dead." As demonstrated in the headline, the news

organization made the editorial decision of including the identifier “gay,” with the event of a gunman attacking, which implies a causation to the readership. In journalism, the headline is the text indicating the nature of the article, and without reading the article, the audience can assume the incident had a homophobic motive. In my version of a style guide, I believe identifiers should not be revealed in a headline unless the event being tied to it was certifiably correlated through thorough and transparent reporting. Otherwise, a headline should not include an identifier, be it race, sexual orientation, religion, etc.

The editorial staff of The New York Times also made the decision to include the identifier of gay in the lede of the story. The lede of a news story contains the most newsworthy part of the article, and the lede of this particular news story was “A man who called 911 to proclaim allegiance to the Islamic State terrorist group, and who had been investigated in the past for possible terrorist ties, stormed a gay nightclub here Sunday morning, wielding an assault rifle and a pistol, and carried out the worst mass shooting in United States history, leaving 50 people dead and 53 wounded” (Alvarez and Pérez-Peña). It is the duty of a journalist to report facts, and it cannot be denied that Pulse nightclub is known as a gay nightclub. Therefore, including the identifier in the lede is not necessarily faulty. However, my further criticism upon the article’s use deals with how prominently the identifier of gay is used.

The identifier’s second appearance explicitly ties the motive to homophobia, and discloses an inaccurate, false statement. It said “[The incident] was the worst act of terrorism on American soil since Sept. 11, 2001, and the deadliest attack on a gay target in the nation’s history, though officials said it was not clear whether some victims had been accidentally shot by law enforcement officers” (Alvarez and Pérez-Peña). In describing it as the deadliest attack on a

gay target, The New York Times explicitly wrote that it was an intentional attack against a gay population, which was later revealed to be false.

2. *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2016

The first article written on the incident by The Washington Post was headlined “Gunman who killed 49 in Orlando nightclub had pledged allegiance to ISIS.” In this version of the article, the identifier is not used in the headline, an editorial decision well-made. Similar to The New York Times, The Washington Post used the identifier in the lede of the story, reporting “A gunman who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State opened fire inside a crowded gay bar and dance club here early Sunday, leaving 49 people dead and 53 injured in the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, authorities said” (Tsukayama et al.). An observation worth mentioning is that The Washington Post’s article was written a day later than the New York Times’ article, and differs in the reporting of how many people were killed at the shooting, 49 turning out to be the factually accurate amount. This speaks to a point made by Margaret Sullivan, former public editor, also known as ombudsman, at The New York Times. Ms. Sullivan’s reign as public editor lasted from 2012-2016. Currently, she is the media columnist for The Washington Post. In a phone conversation, she referred to a challenge facing all journalist’s today:

“In breaking coverage of things, a lot of times there are mistakes and false conclusions that are drawn in immediate breaking coverage, it’s almost unavoidable, because it’s such a chaotic time. People are dying, and there’s all this stuff going on, and you’re trying to figure out what’s going on. It’s almost like a rule of engagement that, unfortunately, some of it is going to be wrong. I wish that were not the case but it generally is, which is

why the news media needs to slow down a little bit sometimes which is also very hard to do because there's competitive pressures.” (Sullivan)

Ms. Sullivan's statement was directly referring to “the impression that [the incident] was an anti-gay hate crime,” but still rings true to the report of how many people were killed, adding to my own point that The Washington Post's editorial decision to refrain from racing to publish the story yielded a higher caliber of journalism. However, a faulty decision was made to include the sentence “[The incident] also ignited fears of a broader campaign against the American gay, lesbian and transgender community as the first anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage approaches” (Tsukayama et al.) without the immediate, transparent addition that the motive of the crime was not yet clear. In my version of a style guide, the transparent concept of including a sentence disclosing that motives are unclear unless they have factually been proven otherwise must always be presented. Although the article did include such a sentence in reporting, “The Islamic State has repeatedly executed gay people and released videos showing their gruesome executions. FBI Special Agent Ron Hopper said the bureau was still working to determine whether sexual orientation was a motive in the Orlando attack,” (Tsukayama, et al.) it did not come until eight paragraphs later. It should have been included in the same sentence that attempted to correlate the incident to a campaign against the gay community.

3. *Grantland*, 15 Jan. 2014

Although admittedly an extreme example, one newsroom's discovery of an individual's sexual orientation who was not openly transgender led to newsrooms attributing her suicide to fear of being outed, a causal relation I argue was not supported by facts. *Grantland*, the

ESPN-owned sports and pop-culture digital magazine, published a 7,700 word longform article on “Dr. V’s Magical Putter,” with the subhead of “The remarkable story behind a mysterious inventor who built a ‘scientifically superior’ golf club.” The story, written by Caleb Hannan, was not so much about the magical putter, Oracle GX1, as it was an unraveling of its inventor Dr. Essay Anne Vanderbilt, known to friends as Dr. V. Hannan had become fascinated with learning more about the inventor, despite Dr. V granting approval for the story in an email correspondence with Hannan so long as it focused on the science behind the putter, and not the scientist. Through his own diligent research, Hannan was able to uncover that Dr. V had lied about her credentials as an aeronautical physicist from MIT, confirming that “she had faked the credentials that made the science behind her club seem legitimate” (Hannan). He also discovered that she had taken cash from an investor that she never returned. This discovery exhibited a quality level of journalism and was undeniably relevant in a legitimate line of inquiry. It was the line of inquiry that led him to the discovery that she had been born a man. He reveals this in the sentence, “What began as a story about a brilliant woman with a new invention had turned into the tale of a troubled man who had invented a new life for himself” (Hannan).

It was not long after Hannan informed Dr. V and her partner, Gerri Jordan, of his discovery of her fraudulent past and her life as Stephen Krol that Dr. V committed suicide. After detailing Dr. V’s aggression toward him upon discovering he had uncovered her fraudulent past and that she was a transgender woman, Hannan reveals that Dr. V had committed suicide in this course of his reporting and writing of this longform piece. He writes:

“Not long after she sent her email, I got a call from a Pennsylvania phone number that I didn’t recognize. It was Dr. V’s ex-brother-in-law, who represented the closest I had

gotten to finding someone who could tell me what she'd been like in her previous life.

"Well, there's one less con man in the world now," he said. Even though he hated his former family member, this seemed like an especially cruel way to tell me that Dr. V had died. All he could tell me was what he knew — that it had been a suicide. A few weeks later a police report filled in the details." (Hannan)

After criticism of outing Dr. V caught on, Grantland's editor in chief, Bill Simmons, included an Editor's Note in disclosing: *"A letter from Grantland editor-in-chief Bill Simmons on the origins of this story and how it came to be published can be read here. A guest editorial from Christina Kahrl detailing the problems with this piece as they relate to transgender issues can be found here."*

In light of this unfolding, The Washington Post headlined their article "Grantland offers two sides on divisive article about transgender inventor who killed herself." The editorial decision to include "transgender" (Farhi) in the headline is one worth examination, as it was never internally discussed that Hannan had any intention to out Dr. V. While he had informed her that he was aware of her fraudulent past and was able to discover that she was born a male, it cannot be said with certainty that Dr. V committed suicide because she feared being outed. However, the identity of transgender and the event of committing suicide are predominant facts in the headline, and give off the impression that the two are verifiably correlated. Perhaps the idea of being exposed of lying about her academic background and work experience and having taken cash from an investor that she never returned would have been the reason she killed herself.

The decision to include the identifier of sexual orientation is one that should be analyzed more carefully on behalf of the editorial staff of any media organization. Due to its sensitive nature, it is critical that newsrooms have a discussion about when it is relevant in a news story and create guidelines to assist the editorial decision making process. Sullivan deems that there must be a sensible and justifiable reason to include identifiers, but my analysis reveals that sometimes sensibility can be blurred by subjective reasoning, rather than objectivity and due process. Ms. Sullivan attests that these judgement calls are made by human beings and sometimes the wrong judgement is made. One reason she provided for a wrong judgement being made is because of prejudices that may or may not be acknowledged. Sullivan said it would be impossible to make an overall sweeping statement that would prevent wrong judgements from occurring, which is why she deems it so important to have diversity in newsrooms so that people can bring sensitivity to certain subjects because of their own experience that “maybe the guy sitting next to them on the copy desk doesn’t have, or maybe he does have it, and that’s why it’s really important not to have a completely homogeneous newsroom because it’s valuable to have other people’s points of view” (Sullivan). Her sentiments echo that of Simmons when he included in his editorial that the biggest mistake made by the editorial board was not having somebody from the transgender community read the draft before publication. This is not to say they would have held off on publishing it, but perhaps the impression Hannan gave off when he wrote “What began as a story about a brilliant woman with a new invention had turned into the tale of a troubled man who had invented a new life for himself” would have been reconsidered as it implied a causal relation between Dr. V’s fraudulent past and her status as a transgender woman.

Given these considerations, I believe sexual orientation to be relevant in biographical and announcement stories that involve significant, groundbreaking or historic events, such as in being the first of something. For example, The New York Times appropriately used the identifier of gay in their article headlined “Colorado Democrats Elect State’s First Gay Speaker.” It cannot be argued that historical moments on behalf of groups who have been marginalized serves as a newsworthy occurrence worth identifying. As for other occurrences, being wary of the causal relation placed on the identity of an individual and the event being discussed, especially when efforts of verification have not been made, is my other conclusive point of guidance in editorial decision making.

VIII. CONCLUSION

What began as an analysis about when to use sensitive identifiers such as race and sexual orientation in a news story soon became an awakening of the narratives journalists create through their application of such identifiers. At the premise of the scientific method and logical thought, we are taught that correlation does not equal causation. And yet, journalists have been committing logical fallacies in their reporting. Seemingly minor changes in a news story can make all the difference in the profession of journalism and its obligation to truth telling. Journalists have lent themselves to shaping public thought through false causal relations in their (purposeful or ignorant) application of sensitive identifiers such as race and sexual orientation in a news story. When news stories tie an identity such as race and sexual orientation to an event in an effort to create a correlation without due process, they are doing a disservice to the public, and ultimately fabricating social justice issues. Anyone who is concerned about injustice should be concerned that the stories journalists tell are often just plain false or imply a false narrative -

which most people easily dismiss as such. As a result, real social justice issues get diluted in this flood. It has played a significant role in either distrust of the media, or journalism used as a platform for confirmation bias. However, this polarized view of journalism can be rectified through a recollection of core journalistic values in the face of sensitive stories.

In future research I hope to explore how social media and protests drive coverage in preposterous ways. The presence of protests and social media has made prematurely injecting race into a news story unavoidable, which unnecessarily creates a racial animus and puts the country into uproar, even where there is no evidence to support a racial motive. This mob mentality makes race relevant because journalists must include the identifier as a part of a reaction from the public. In other words, the mob makes it a part of the story, without any facts to prove it. But journalists have to cite their side, even if it means implying pertinence. A journalist is typically expected to point out community concerns while including context, facts, etc. that let the reader weigh if those concerns are valid in any particular case. The problem is when journalists stop taking it case by case and start sorting stories out by narrative. However, it has become a recent phenomenon where community concerns are not an accurate gauge of anything, especially in the social media age of monstrous distortion. Social media outrage seems to be the tail that wags the media dog, and it helps journalists to get things wrong over and over.

The shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager by a white male police officer, has widely been considered an event of injustice that spread the Black Lives Matter movement twice fold, and is a notable example of how outrage drives stories. Although the movement initially started after the July 13, 2013 acquittal of white male neighborhood watchguard George Zimmerman after he shot unarmed black/African American teenager

Trayvon Martin, the movement especially caught on after the death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. Race became a huge issue in the coverage and reaction to the event, and several high-profile news stories on the matter resulted. The immediate reaction to the shooting was that it had been the result of racial prejudice, as can be seen in The New York Time's first article headlined "Grief and Protests Follow Shooting of a Teenager." The lede and nut graf were as follows:

"The fatal shooting of an unarmed black teenager Saturday by a police officer in a St. Louis suburb came after a struggle for the officer's gun, police officials said Sunday, in an explanation that met with outrage and skepticism in the largely African-American community.

The killing of the youth, Michael Brown, 18, ignited protests on Saturday and Sunday in Ferguson, Mo., a working-class suburb of about 20,000 residents. Hundreds of people gathered at the scene of the shooting to question the police and to light candles for Mr. Brown, who was planning to begin college classes on Monday." (Bosman and Fitzsimmons)

While I would argue that the media inappropriately injected race into the story and further created a racial animus country-wide, the reporting of the story began after a mob of protests. While journalists can't control the reaction of the community, it does not excuse the fact that more prominence was not placed on what they did not know - whether or not race played a role in Brown's death. Instead, an overload of implying a racial animus was given in the following paragraphs:

“Mr. Brown’s stepfather, Louis Head, held a cardboard sign that said, “Ferguson police just executed my unarmed son.”

At a news conference on Sunday morning, the St. Louis County police chief, Jon Belmar, said that a man had been shot and killed after he had assaulted a police officer and the two had struggled over the officer’s gun inside his patrol car. At least one shot was fired from inside the car, Chief Belmar said.

“The genesis of this was a physical confrontation,” Chief Belmar told reporters.

But elected officials and advocacy groups called for a full investigation and questioned the tactics of the police, who acknowledged that Mr. Brown had been unarmed. Antonio French, a city councilman in St. Louis, was at the scene of the protests on Sunday and said in an interview that more than 100 people had gathered, most of them silently standing in groups, some leaving behind teddy bears and balloons to memorialize Mr. Brown.” (Bosman and Fitzsimmons)

As can be observed from the provided introductory paragraphs of the article, no facts are available to suggest a causal relation between Brown’s identity and the event of his death. In fact, it is not until the 22nd out of 26 paragraphs that the article reveals “Any other details, including the reason as to why the encounter occurred and the initial struggle ensued, are still a part of the continuing investigation,” the police said in a statement” (Bosman and Fitzsimmons). Even the mere rearranging of this paragraph to the third or fourth paragraph of the story would make a significant difference in The New York Times’ credibility as an objective source of information. However, the burying of this information creates the impression that it is not as

newsworthy as the reaction of the community, when in reality it is the only semblance of objectivity in the face of alleged racism.

IX: RECAP

It is the duty of journalists to serve as fact-tellers. Although this thesis initially sought to provide journalists with helpful and specific guidelines on when to use identifiers such as race and sexual orientation, it turned into the uncovering of shockingly faulty editorial decision making across the country in what could be described as the pursuit of a narrative. Stated simply, journalists should never imply a causation without due process and actual evidence supporting the causation. This should not be a newfound revelation for journalists. As discussed in the analysis of news stories, if stakeholders bring relevance into a story without causation being proved, the identifier should only be presented in the same paragraph introducing the stakeholder's point of view. However, transparency must also be presented in the form of a sentence stating that the race or sexual orientation of the individual(s) has not yet been determined to have been a causal factor. Journalists must be willing to include what they do not know, instead of running with a narrative and catastrophically misleading the public. Direct relevance can only be defined with facts, not with assumptions or the desires of fitting a narrative. The only advice I can offer to journalists is to recall their job as truth tellers: Can it be proven this sensitive identifier is pertinent in implying a causal relation? If the answer is no, do not include it in the headline or the lede. It may be introduced later if a stakeholder, such as protestors, makes it relevant from their point of view, but that is the only exception. Otherwise, the journalist becomes the fabricator of the social justice issues, and not only are real social

justice issues diluted in this flood, but journalism as a source of truth and objectivity is rendered false.

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